

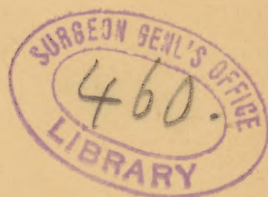
SMITH (J. M.) (2)

Biographical Memoir of  
Cornelius E. De Puy M.D.

By  
Joseph Mather Smith M.D.

From the New York Medical  
and Physical Journal - 1825;  
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## BIOGRAPHY.

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*A Biographical Memoir of CORNELIUS E. DE PUY, M. D. member of the New-York Historical Society, &c. read before the Physico-Medical Society of New-York, at its anniversary meeting on the 8th of August, 1822. By JOSEPH M. SMITH, M. D.*

GENTLEMEN,

IN accordance with that law of our nature, which prompts us to preserve the memory of our departed friends, and under the sanction of a resolution of this society, we propose at this time to commemorate the life and character of our late associate, Dr. Cornelius E. De Puy. It is not in every instance, however amiable in their private walks, and beloved in their social relations, that our deceased friends are entitled to a public tribute of respect. In all ordinary cases, it is enough to mourn for them in private, and to recount their virtues in the circle to which they were endeared. But there are occasions in which something more is proper. The death of individuals distinguished for active and unbounded philanthropy, extraordinary attainments in literature or the arts, important discoveries in science, or great civil or military services to their country, is calculated to produce a deep and lasting impression on the public mind; and accordingly, to all such are awarded, by common consent, the honours of public orations and finished biographies; their names are recorded on the page of history, and statues and temples are erected to perpetuate their memory. But these honours are

merited by comparatively few ; and no one can reasonably expect to deserve them, who does not, either by the force of his genius, or with moderate powers, by unceasing sedulity, rise greatly superior to his fellows in the benefits he confers on his country or the world. There is still another class of individuals, who though their lives afford no matter for the historian or biographer, are distinguished by so many noble and generous traits of character, and so many evidences of intellectual superiority, as well as indications of future pre-eminence and usefulness, that to them, on their premature removal from life, is properly adjudged, at least the honour of public eulogy. In this class, the subject of the present notice held a respectable rank.

Were the feelings, which friendship inspires, likely to endanger the correctness of the estimate we make of another's character, I should hesitate before attempting to proceed in the duty assigned me ; but this, it is believed, can rarely or never be the case when the chief merit of an individual is derived from circumstances which have as closely connected him with the public, as with his nearest friends. To the public, legitimately belong the capacities and talents of the head, and to friends, the affections and sympathies of the heart ; hence, those qualities which we find in another as common property, may be examined with equal impartiality by a friend, and doubtless will be with more precision, than by one who has never felt any personal interest in his prosperity. Yet, to avoid the errors arising from excited feelings, let us, instead of exclusive panegyric, review the considerations that claim for our late associate, the honour which the present exercise is intended to bestow on his memory.

The bereavement we have suffered, is rendered more than usually lamentable by the circumstances under which it happened. When those around us pass away through the outlets of disease or old age, we contemplate their departure under views with which we are familiar ; and consequently, I seldom experience any additional pain from the manner of their death ; but when they fall by sudden and unexpected



disaster, then truly do we feel the force of the truth, "in the midst of life we are in death;" then, indeed, is the heart made to feel the poignancy of grief.

Scarce had our city recovered from the gloom occasioned by the loss of the packet *Albion* on the shore of Ireland, than we were shocked by the tidings of a similar calamity which happened to a party belonging to the *Franklin 74*, in attempting to land on the coast of Chili. In the former instance, we not only wept at the recital of the tale, which numbered so many lives suddenly withdrawn from the sum of human existence, but we opened our bosoms to a free communion with those who had suffered by the loss of friends and relatives: we felt that our country had been deprived of citizens eminently worthy in their several professions and callings; and we turned with more than common sensibility to the college of a sister State, and, in the spirit of condolence, participated in her grief for the loss of a young but distinguished professor. In the latter instance, our feelings have been somewhat of a different sort. The *Franklin* left the United States, bearing with her to a distant region, those for whose welfare were breathed the ardent prayers of innumerable friends, and the best wishes of the American people. Besides the solicitude felt for the personal safety of those who had embarked in her, there was a more than ordinary interest excited by the expectation, that her cruise in the Pacific Ocean would afford many opportunities of extending the knowledge of the power and character of our country, and of enlarging the boundaries of science.

In this latter service Dr. De Puy was exclusively engaged. Under the influence of such feelings and such expectations with what appalling emotions did we receive the intelligence, which announced the fatal adventure on the 19th of March; an adventure long to be remembered, as it deprived the expedition of its principal labourers in natural science, and this society of one of its most promising and valuable members. But he did not perish alone: in the number lost on that occasion were several officers, whose gallantry and accomplish-



ments had placed them high in the estimation and confidence of their country. But while

“For them, is sorrow’s purest sigh,  
O’er ocean’s heaving bosom sent,”

let it here be our duty and melancholy pleasure, to speak of him who was endeared to us by the strongest ties of social fellowship, and whose death we have reason deeply to lament.

A long period of friendly intercourse, and, I may add, of intimacy with Dr. De Puy, enables me to assert that he possessed many rare and excellent qualities; and that he was distinguished for his rapid and uninterrupted advancement in literature and science; we say rapid and uninterrupted, for his mind was of so active a turn, that idleness was a state he could not endure; and as his temperament was of that moral cast which made him shun the dissolute and vulgar expedients of killing time, and especially, as he had an early fondness for, and subsequently a strong ambition to excel in science and classical learning, his attention was constantly devoted to intellectual improvement.

He was born of Dutch parentage, in Ulster County, New-York, about the year 1791. His education, prior to the commencement of his medical studies, appears to have been limited to the branches usually taught at a grammar school. But this, to one so ardent in the pursuit of knowledge, was a foundation sufficiently broad for him to proceed in the erection of a superstructure, which, had he lived to complete, we believe, would have been an ornament to his country, and to him a monument of fame. Commencing his course of medical reading in the country, under the direction of an eminent practical physician, he soon acquired that knowledge which fitted him to enter upon the more elaborate studies connected with the proper attendance upon the lectures delivered in the University of this State. On removing to the city, he became deeply impressed with the advantages to be derived from the prelections of public teachers; the ready access to professional and miscellaneous libraries, and from

visiting the institutions for the healing of the sick. These considerations determined him to complete his pupilage in the city, and eventually to make it his permanent residence. He was graduated doctor of medicine in the University, in the year 1814. Those, who knew him at that period will testify, that few candidates for the honours of the college were distinguished for a wider range of general information, or a more particular and systematic knowledge of the several branches of medical science. Prior to his graduation, he held for a considerable time the place of resident physician in the New-York Alms-House, an establishment superior in many respects to a regular hospital for improvement in clinical medicine. While in this institution, he discovered a ready talent for discerning the nature of diseases, and a correct judgment in prescription.

His settlement in this city, in the practice of his profession, may be regarded as one of the circumstances which concurred to favour the institution of the Physico-Medical Society. The views, entertained by the projector of this society, were early embraced by Dr. De Puy; and his zeal and talents were immediately engaged in digesting its plan, and bringing its objects into a definite form. On the 8th of August, 1815, he assisted at its organization; and subsequently proved himself one of its most able and indefatigable supporters. His intelligence and literary qualifications, secured to him, from the commencement of the society to the period he left New-York, his annual election as chairman of the committee of publication, an office, the duties of which he discharged with a fidelity and judgment that deserved and obtained the highest approbation. His professional attainments were fully tested in the publication of the first volume of our transactions, which appeared in 1817, two years after the institution of the society. The contributions, made by himself to that volume, have been justly esteemed among its most ingenious and logical essays. His first paper, entitled "An Inquiry into the botanical history, chemical properties, and medicinal qualities of the *Erigeron Canadense*,"



was read within a month after the society commenced its operations ; a fact we deem worthy of being mentioned, inasmuch as this communication was entirely voluntary, or, in other words, was not called for at that particular time, by the obligation which the constitution provides for securing the regular reading of papers. It was offered as a testimonial of his devotedness to the interests of the society. The several topics treated of in that essay are discussed in a practical and satisfactory manner.

But the merit of Dr. De Puy, as a medical writer, is more fully discovered in his "Dissertation on the uniform action of the Absorbents." This paper was submitted to the society on the 3d of September, 1816, and may be regarded as the ablest production of his pen. It was evidently the result of much reflection ; and though the phenomena adduced to establish his opinion that, "the action of the absorbents continues uniform throughout every stage of life, and in every condition of the body, whether of health or disease, unless when mechanically interrupted," are, for the most part, generally known, and considered as proving an opposite doctrine, yet his ingenuity made it appear, that all of them could be explained on the principle of an *uniformity* of absorbent action. And further, he contended, and with great plausibility of reasoning and variety of illustration, that the phenomena of health and disease, as well as the physiological changes, which occur in the different periods of life, could not be reduced to a consistent theory without admitting the principle in question. He considered the absorbents as placed beyond the reach of *stimulus* or *counter-stimulus*. Their functions, he maintained, were entirely impassive, and that, though the heart might be the *primum vivens* of the system, the mouths of the absorbents were its true *ultimum moriens*. Whether this doctrine will be found true, to the extent it was carried by Dr. De Puy, is perhaps questionable ; but, however this may be, all must acquiesce in the sentiment of his reviewer, that "the considerations, urged by the author, evince an original



and comprehensive mind, knowing, at once, how to make observations, and to reason upon them."

A third paper was read by Dr. De Puy on the 16th October, 1817, entitled, "Remarks on the efficacy of friction in apoplexy and palsy, proved by cases." In this communication, we are presented with the most indubitable proofs of his ability as a practical physician. The cases are drawn up with great neatness and perspicuity, and his pathological reflections are highly interesting and instructive.

In thus noticing the writings of Dr. De Puy, it will be recollected, that we have spoken of those only which have appeared before the public. Several other tracts of a practical character were read by him before the society at different times, all of which were creditable to their author. It must not be supposed from the number of papers furnished by Dr. De Puy for the first volume of our transactions, that he was anxious to appear in print. That he was not influenced by a feeling of this sort, is evident from the fact, that, though always engaged with his pen, he never contributed to any of the medical or other periodical journals of our country. This circumstance, we think, exhibits, in a strong light, the motives which induced him to present his first offerings to the public through the medium of our printed transactions. Though ambitious of individual respectability as a writer, he hoped, that by his own communications to the society, he might be able to do something which would tend to render its first publication acceptable to the profession. The character of the society was with him an object of peculiar regard; and all his assiduities seem to have been directed more to the view of increasing its reputation, than of advancing his own fame.

When we review these demonstrations of his zeal in promoting the objects of this association, we are made to feel how tenderly we should cherish the recollection of his labours, and how great is the respect we owe to his memory. The first efforts of young men for the public good, or the advancement of science, are always regarded with complacency.

though they may fail to be positively useful ; the first efforts of Dr. De Puy were emphatically directed to the high and noble purpose of establishing an institution for the promotion of medical science—an institution whose seventh anniversary we this day celebrate, in lamenting his death, and pronouncing his praise.

Though Dr. De Puy did not appear before the public as a writer after the publication of our transactions, it must not be supposed, that his ardour in the pursuit of knowledge had in the least degree abated. He still pressed onward in the retired paths of literature and science, making great additions to his stock of general information. He carefully preserved his acquisitions in Grecian and Roman literature, and devoted considerable attention to the French and Italian languages. To the French language he was particularly attached ; he studied its genius extensively and critically, and spoke it with little or no hesitancy. He also made himself familiar with the modern classics, as well as the fashionable reading of the day : but the subject to which he more particularly gave his attention for the last two or three years, was one of confessedly great magnitude, and of immense importance. We allude to Hygeia, or the science of health. It must not be concealed that Dr. De Puy, though fully qualified to discharge the duties of a practitioner, had lost, in a measure, his confidence in some of the boasted principles of therapeutics. He often doubted the efficacy and propriety of that polypharmacy and multiplicity of remedies which are sanctioned by the generality of physicians ; and moreover, was frequently disposed to question, if medicine, as we find it through the world, was not, upon the whole, rather an evil than a benefit. These doubts were probably elicited during the rigid examination which every medical subject underwent when submitted to the analysis of his strong and discriminating mind. Such suspicions, if not carried to the point of absolute infidelity, of which in his case there was no danger, were, we believe, calculated to make him a better physician. The most important effect they appear to have produced, was

to turn his mind to that department of science, which, if brought to perfection, would in a degree supersede the necessity of an extensive materia medica. The study of hygeia he thought was too much neglected. In his first surveys of this field of inquiry, he was so struck with its fertility, that he resolved to enter upon its cultivation. He accordingly read with attention all the modern works relating to the subject. The French and German he found had contributed by far the most towards the elucidation of its elementary principles. From the older writers, whom he consulted in the true spirit of philosophy, he obtained many valuable hints and interesting facts. In a word, he diligently sought out every source of information which had a bearing upon the main object of his inquiries. His mind thus stored with the knowledge of others, was prepared to bring its own energies into the work of original investigation. Those who, in private, have enjoyed his free communications on the various topics embraced in his researches, could not but derive instruction from them; and at the same time feel a conviction, that he was fully qualified to advance the science in question. Had he lived, we have every reason to believe, that at some future time he would have distinguished himself by elevating the study of hygeia to its proper rank among the branches of professional education.

The attainments of Dr. De Puy in natural history were highly respectable. Though not devoted to any branch in particular, his proficiency, generally, was such as enabled him with little preparation to prosecute with systematic accuracy, any department belonging to that interesting and extensive study. In his tour through the northern and eastern States and the Canadas in 1820, he availed himself of the opportunities which offered, to extend his knowledge of mineralogy and geology. He travelled solely for the purpose of improvement; and, we believe, was abundantly rewarded for his time and industry. The falls of Niagara, the lakes, and the diversified and stupendous scenery of the north, afforded subjects for contemplation in perfect congruity with the gene-



ral tenor of his mind. The sublime in nature powerfully arrested his attention, and he dwelt upon its objects with a solemnity peculiar to himself.

His mind at this period appears to have arrived at that point of maturity, in which, to a comprehensive range of knowledge was united a decision of character that fitted him, in a peculiar manner, for the enterprise in which he was finally engaged. It was early in the summer of the last year, that he conceived the design of visiting the countries of South America. The facilities offered him by Commodore Stewart on board of the Franklin, he thought were so favourable to the prosecution of a favourite object, that he determined to embark in her. This determination was not made in a moment, when the imagination pictured to him a new world of gratifications, but was the conclusion of much serious reflection. He fully considered the social privations, as well as the hardships and dangers, which must necessarily attend a three years' absence in journeying by sea and land in a distant and comparatively unfrequented quarter of the globe. But these discouragements he regarded but as fleeting shadows over the bright prospect which fairly opened before him. The gratification of a laudable curiosity, the extension of his own knowledge, and the probability of being able to communicate to his countrymen, or at least to his friends, something interesting and original concerning the natural history and political condition of the rising states of South America, were, in his mind, considerations that outweighed all the objections against the proposed undertaking. Provided with every thing necessary to aid him in his researches, in the possession of vigorous health, and in the best feelings of a son, a brother, a friend, and a patriot, he left his country full of hope and full of composure. Heaven seemed to smile on his purpose; and in human calculation he was destined to return: but in the council of Omnipotence it was otherwise decreed. He was, indeed, permitted to contemplate in the southern hemisphere, to use his own beautiful quotation in a letter to a friend, "a new heavens and a new earth," and to enter upon the labours

and enjoyments he anticipated. But in an hour when least disturbed by fearful apprehensions, when no danger appeared to darken his prospect, the frail bark in which he sailed on an excursion from Valparaiso to Quintera, foundered near the coast, amidst the breakers of a swelling sea. Merged in the tumultuous waves, his earthly hopes were suddenly blasted ; and ah ! who can tell his emotions when, in the consciousness of his situation, he found himself entwined in the arms of death, and sinking to a watery grave !—But while we pause to meditate on his tragical fate, let us not forget to joy in the reflection, that he was ever thoughtful on the uncertainties of life, and the contingences by which it might be suddenly closed ; and what is more important, that he was strongly impressed with the truth of the Christian religion, and had a deep sense of its high and holy obligations.

Though Dr. De Puy had scarcely attained his thirtieth year, there was something in his character which strikingly elevated him above the generality of men. At all times modest and unobtrusive, his social qualities were known to those only who were intimately acquainted with him. His conduct was strictly governed by a nice sense of propriety ; and his deportment, both in public and private, was eminently calculated to ensure respect and command attention. To talents capable of advancing the interests of science and literature, he united an ardent disposition to promote the cause of universal benevolence. Distinguished rather for strength and capaciousness of intellect than brilliancy of parts, he was more particularly qualified for undertakings which require the exercise of the understanding. When engaged in the study of a favourite subject, he gave his whole mind to its attainment, and at such times, no other object, however interesting in itself, could in the least degree divert his attention. This peculiarity may, we believe, be considered as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of his mind ; for it frequently seemed to operate with an intensity that deprived him of the enjoyments that spring from a variety of mental occupations. A mind

capable of such inflexible devotion to a particular pursuit, was admirably fitted to study the character and explore the riches of a foreign country; and it was this consideration that enabled the friends of Dr. De Puy to assure themselves, that his travels would afford him an abundant increase of knowledge and fame. That his time was well and unremittingly employed after he left this city, is fully attested in his journal and voluminous correspondence. On the voyage to Valparaiso he made so much progress in the study of the Spanish language, that on his arrival there, he could discourse intelligibly with the people of Chili. And, finally, considering his brief opportunities for research, the extent of his observations, and the minuteness with which he has detailed them in writing, are truly surprising; and it is to be hoped, that his manuscripts, in judicious hands, will afford a selection of matter sufficiently interesting to communicate to the public.

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